

# THE POWER OF THE PURSE: PUBLIC FUNDING AND THE AESTHETICS OF VIDEO

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*Making art without money in a field in which the medium is as much money as it is film or tape does not make for peace of mind. No field promises less to those who enter it, and no field keeps its lack of promise better. How you get money to people is almost as important as the money itself*

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In 1965, two unrelated events, working in tandem, created independent video. The introduction of the 1/2" reel-to-reel portapak held out the technological possibility for

personal, non-commercial uses of television. And the formal creation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA) laid the foundations for the economic structures of the new medium.

This primary coincidence, the unprecedented and simultaneous availability of money and machines, played a critical role in the subsequent development of independent video. Because video did not exist prior to the inception of public patronage, and because funding commenced virtually without delay, video is the first and only art form to develop entirely within the embrace of purposeful cultural policy. The effects of this circumstance are manifold and raise important questions: How has public funding altered the evolution of the medium? How has the relationship of the artist to the medium and to the public been affected? And the core question: how does the involvement of public agencies directly or indirectly affect aesthetics and expressive modalities?

Because funding is just one element of video's cultural context, these questions are not likely to receive definitive answers. It is, impossible to separate the aesthetic impact of available production tools—the impact of technology—from the impact of the money which buys them. Similarly, the artists' natural desire to reach large audiences cannot be readily distinguished from the effects of funding imperatives which encourage broadcast. Nor can widespread government support for avant-garde activities—and the subsequent legitimization of such activities—be distinguished from the general social acceptance of the avant-garde in fashion, politics, architecture, et. al. during the late sixties and early seventies.

It should be noted that one factor in the correlation between aesthetic developments and funding practices lies in the influential role the constituent community of artists, critics and arts administrators plays in the formulation of funding policy within each discipline. Thus, funding is not something which is solely "done to" the funded without feedback and collaboration. While the staff and Council of the funding agencies are powerful, the primary structural element in the awarding of grants, a peer review panel, inherently incorporates in funding decisions the collaboration of what can somewhat disingenuously be termed "the field."\* (In fact, one primary function of the peer panel is to mitigate the political onus on state employees for potentially unpopular funding decisions.) Also, the program staff—those who write guidelines and evaluate grant proposals within particular disciplines—are themselves frequently former non-profit administrators and former or currently practicing artists; many are finely attuned to the needs of artists and arts service organizations.

No art can be unaffected by the circumstances of its practice, and all the arts exist within economic structures which nurture or constrict, broaden or channel the productions

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\* In the case of NYSCA, all grants are **awarded** by the New York State Council on the Arts proper, composed of up to 20 individuals prominent in arts, business and academia. The councilmembers are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the State Senate to five year terms. This Council is advised on **individual** grant requests by the staff and panel of the various disciplines (e.g. Electronic Media **and** Film, Visual Arts, Dance, Music). In practice, the recommendations of the disciplines are almost always ratified by the Council unless there is a difference in the amounts recommended by the program staff and the panel. At the NEA, the structure is **somewhat** different. There, the National Council on the Arts sets overall policy, but all grants are **awarded by the Chairman, who may choose to accept, alter or disregard** recommendations of the panel and staff. Prior to Frank Hodson's tenure (1981-1989), the Chairmen, nearly without exception, followed the panels' recommendations.

of artists. Public funding inherently recognizes this in its core concept: that the best environment for artistic creation is one which shields the artist from the exigencies of the marketplace. Nonetheless, in most art forms the influence of the public funder is secondary to other important support structures. For instance, the aspirations of painters are generally informed by the possibility of exhibition and subsequent sales in galleries, most of which do not receive public support. Similarly, most novelists desire publication, and virtually all publishing houses are supported solely by commercial sales. While public funding certainly nourishes painting and writing, it is unlikely that changes in philanthropic patterns, or even a cessation of public support, would substantially deflect the overall development of those media. Painting, writing, et. al, are embedded in an autonomous marketplace and are not particularly sensitive to philanthropic imperatives. There simply isn't enough money in public patronage to create the gravity necessary for real impact.

For video, however, public funding is the marketplace and provides the predominant reward structure for the medium. In essence, the ecology of the video world is dependent upon continual infusions of public money. It is not that more money is available for video than for other media (in fact there is less), but rather no other substantial source exists to counterbalance the influence of philanthropic funds. There is no open market for the works of video artists. Indeed, with only minor exceptions, all possible rewards accruing to a videomaker in the form of fellowships, production funds, teaching jobs, exhibition opportunities and published criticism derive directly or indirectly from a hefty public subsidy. Even the few grants available from private foundations are unlikely to be awarded to those unsuccessful in securing public funds. On the level that

most directly affects aesthetics, public funds subsidize a large portion of the budgets of organizations providing access to production and post-production equipment, broadcast and other exhibition opportunities, instructional workshops and artist-in-residence fellowships. Often the equipment provided to artists—and thus determining the production options available to them—derives directly from specific contractual obligations to funding agencies (e.g. an organization which receives support for operation of an image-processing facility). In many cases, these organizations would—and do—cease to exist if funds are greatly reduced or cut off. Because the most prominent artists do well within this structure—a solipsistic formulation, to be sure—and because less prominent artists often aspire to gain entry to it, the medium is extremely sensitive to shifts in funding policy and procedure.

This is the inevitable paradox of widespread public patronage: that a system founded on the core belief that the artist should be shielded from the constraints of the marketplace is itself a marketplace with its own powerful imperatives and repercussions. The influence of the funding agencies is found not only in specific funding decisions: whether to grant a specific fellowship, to fund a particular exhibition, or to support a public access facility in a given community. More broadly influential is the effect of the funding structures on actions of the artists and administrators who receive support, or would like to receive it. So important is this support that even the aesthetic modalities of the medium are strongly influenced by these structures, and the various changes in funding and the broader economic landscape have been mirrored in aesthetic changes in the tapes and installations.

## Infrastructure and Institutionalization

The most striking aspect of the medium's development is the easiest to overlook: the emergence of independent video occurred at precisely the earliest possible moment that the base condition, in the form of cheap simple equipment, made the medium possible at all.

This is an unusual state of affairs. As a general rule, the mere appearance of a new medium does not inevitably result in its use as an art form. Film lay largely dormant as an independent medium for decades after the invention of 16mm film, while holography, years after its invention, remains a secondary application of photography. Yet the number of video practitioners went from a score or so in 1965 - 1968 to hundreds or thousands only a few years later. The transition from nonexistence to the 1973, Whitney Biennial, a prominent national showcase for new art, took eight years and video had only to wait a few more months for the "Open Circuits" conference at the Museum of Modern Art.

By any standards this is an accelerated development, an acceleration fueled only partially by hardware and the eagerness of curators and critics to adopt the medium. Equally important was the unprecedented public and private investment (mostly public) in an untried, uncharted, unformed, uncertain and unproven endeavor. What's all the more remarkable is that public patronage of all the arts was equally uncharted during the decade following 1965. It was crucial to the subsequent development of video that the introduction of inexpensive hardware occurred in an era where relative prosperity

facilitated the rapid expansion of public patronage at the same time as mainstream culture was favorably disposed to the "avant-garde." In an environment devoid of precedent, with personnel who were new at the game, and in an era with some extra cash to burn, funding agencies were willing to support inherently risky undertakings without clear contexts or predictable outcomes.

Earlier, the equipment was so costly to purchase and maintain that only broad-based commercial entities were able to support it. Video could be subsidized in the late sixties because for the first time it was feasible for public agencies with modest budgets to do so. And because the costs of equipment had dropped sufficiently, a small grant could have a major impact. While the Metropolitan Opera received the better part of a million dollars each year from NYSCA, a relative drop in its bucket, grants of \$10,000 - \$50,000 went far in lean video organizations. Perhaps more to the point, it was possible to get away with funding this stuff precisely because the grants were small; large grants generate concerns about audience size, numbers served, institutional professionalism and the scrutiny of jaundiced eyes unlikely to look favorably on esoteric experiments.

Today, as in the past, NYSCA and the NEA are the predominant public supporters of independent video. The forty-nine other state arts agencies, with a few notable exceptions, are not substantial media funders. So preponderant is NYSCA among state arts agencies that until recently NYSCA's total budget (\$54.5 million in FY90) was larger than those of the other forty-nine states combined. NYSCA's 1989-1990 Media allocation of \$1.7 million is larger than that of any other public funder except the NEA. It should also be noted that several private foundations, most notably the Rockefeller Foundation, played, and continue to play, significant roles.

Apart from the Works Projects Administration, begun under different circumstances and with different aims, the discipline of public arts funding can be said to have begun in 1960 when NYSCA's precursor was founded at the behest of then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller as a temporary arts commission. Rockefeller's intention was to create a modest experiment to get tax dollars to major cultural institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera and the Museum of Modern Art. Despite his intentions, NYSCA veered off in other directions. As one observer recently noted,

Nowhere in Rockefeller's vision was there anything like video, or marginal artists, ,marginal organizations, marginal art forms. If you look down the roster of media funded groups: PASS, the Experimental TV Center, the Kitchen, Asian Cine-Vision, Media Alliance, Film/Video Arts... Rockefeller wouldn't know what any of that was about.-He'd be turning in his grave. (Larson 1989)

But NYSCA was Rockefeller's pet project, and the Governor's powerful hold on the state created a protected environment in which the Council could operate without legislative review. Also contributing to this independence was the size of NYSCA's budget, which was minuscule in relation to the budgets of other New York State agencies.

Thus when it became apparent that a new medium was being created the NYSCA staff had the freedom to take some risks. The timing couldn't have been better. NYSCA's

budget had been growing gradually, from \$450,000 in 1961-1962 when it was a temporary arts commission to about \$2 million, from which a small percentage of funds were going to support video in 1969-1970. 1969 brought the ground breaking exhibition "TV as a Creative Medium" at the Howard Wise Gallery, which signaled the emergence of video as an art form. The next year NYSCA's budget increased ten-fold to \$20.2 million.

Before the increase, funding was an informal arrangement, with staff and panels inventing procedures and initiatives as they went along. In those early days, Film, TV/Media and Literature were a single program under Peter Bradley. Rodger Larson, who was on the first panel, recounted recently,

Peter Bradley wrote the guidelines for Film, TV and Literature. For film, the guidelines emphasized exhibition, but what they found was that requests were coming in from, filmmakers for production funding, and they didn't know how to handle that because there was that stricture about giving money to individuals [NYSCA's enabling legislation permits grants only to non-profit organizations and government entities]. So they were pretty open to whatever was out there ... they would listen to you and say, 'well that sounds good.' They were responsive to the field because they had no agenda.

This outlook was shared by John Hightower, NYSCA's first Executive Director:

Video was a new instrument of artistic expression; the syntax wasn't yet clear or refined. How could one say that one person was more articulate or more effectively expressive? The fact was that a contemporary electronic palette was being used and it really wasn't up to the State Arts Council to make curatorial judgments of what was good or bad, particularly since the syntax was so undeveloped. The best thing was to make the permissive and inclusive gamble of funding a lot of experimentation by virtue of the fact that it was experimentation. That was a pretty early part of the Council's philosophy and concern; to always be more inclusive, than exclusive, and 'accepting of experimentation and the freedom to fail... (Stem 1977;147-148)

The most unusual aspect of this is that for once a government entity was ahead of the populace, the politicians and its specialized constituency. It is nothing short of miraculous that the personnel of a state agency sitting on a pile of money were willing to support a medium lacking product, tradition, infrastructure, clout, audience, critical commentary and more than a handful of practitioners. But the temper of those times supported new and adventurous undertakings, particularly those which seemed to hold the

sometimes competing promises for new modes of expressive art and the revolutionary power of mass communication. In effect, an agency formulated for the support of mainstream art institutions worked to the benefit of small activist groups with a broad range of objectives.

Within a few years the NYSCA Media Program had evolved a strategy in which non-profit institutions were funded for activities in four programmatic areas—production, education, exhibition and distribution—with many organizations receiving funds for programs in several areas. Initiatives in support of video tape preservation and critical writing were added later. The intent behind this unambiguously activist approach was the creation, in the shortest possible time, of an encompassing environment for the development of the medium.

The Media Program had a profound effect on organizations throughout the state. Although committed individuals had -earlier established ad hoc organizations in more-or-less informal fashion, most media organizations were incorporated in response to the possibility of funding. In some cases, existing organizations re-directed their programs accordingly. Significant New York State media organizations founded or re-directed in the early to mid-seventies include Electronic Arts Intermix, the Experimental TV Center/Owego (originally in Binghamton), Global Village, the Intermedia Arts Center (Bayville), Ithaca Video Projects, The Kitchen, Media Bus (originally the Videofreex), Media Study/Buffalo, Portable Channel, Synapse, The TV Labs at WNET and WXXI, Women's Interart Center, Woodstock Community Video, and Young Filmmakers/Video Arts (now Film/Video Arts):

In short order nearly all the organs of exhibition, equipment access, distribution and broadcast were receiving public subsidies. It was not at all unusual, then as now, to sit in a publicly funded exhibition space to view a tape underwritten by a publicly funded production grant, made with equipment obtained at a publicly funded media access center. It's possible the artist didn't have to earn a living while making the tape, because s/he had received a publicly funded fellowship. The tape, most likely, was rented from a publicly funded distribution agency with public funds. The distributor then shared these publicly funded rental fees with the artist. It is just possible that a review will appear in a publicly funded journal.

Thus, one by-product of NYSCA's and NEA's early involvement 'in video was the accelerated creation of an unusual degree of institutionalization. While video's dependence upon expensive equipment, its crew production and its history of political activism created a propensity for organizational structures, the push to create a non-profit media infrastructure was not preordained. In the early Media panels a fundamental disagreement emerged between those who favored avoiding the substantial costs of institutional overhead by emphasizing the funding of projects of individual "artists of merit" and those who favored placing the funding emphasis on the support of an infrastructure for the general development of the medium. In practical terms the issue often centered on choosing between subsidizing access to equipment at more-or-less open "media access centers" and awarding substantial grants to specific artistic projects for which production services would be purchased on the open market and at special limited-access high-tech centers. While these issues have been continually re-evaluated over the

years (with concurrent shifts in funding emphasis), the initial decision was to support—indeed to create—an encompassing non-profit media infrastructure.

While NYSCA-supported fellowship programs were and are conducted, the awards available through these programs (CAPS and its successor, the Artists Fellowship Program of the New York Foundation for the Arts) never rose above \$6,000. (A few substantially larger fellowships, up to \$25,000 are available from the NEA.) By using the vast bulk of its resources to support the infrastructure in the early years, the Media Program substantially limited direct support to individual projects.

The "social engineering" implicit in this *infrastructural* approach derives from the activism and optimism of the '60s, and its primary ideal is a profoundly democratic one: if there is to be a new medium—or a radical realignment of an existing one—then access is an entitlement for all citizens. But more than this, the legacy of the sixties was revealed also as an optimistic belief in progress—as earlier embodied in the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier and the Great Society—which had the confidence to hold that profound changes in the social environment could be achieved by government intervention: By extension, action by the state could aid in the creation of an art form which did not yet in any proper sense exist. And conjoined with this political optimism was the belief in another kind of progress, a modernist cultural progress which holds that today's avant-garde is tomorrow's canon: to ignore the nascent is to betray the future.

This populist funding model effectively decentralizes the support of individual practitioners. The *infrastructural* approach aims at creating a widespread indirect subsidy by enabling the funded organizations to provide services they would not otherwise be able

to provide: a subsidy of the field as a whole in preference to a subsidy of individuals. For exhibition and distribution services, the subsidy makes up the difference between the ticket/rental receipts and operating costs, thus permitting artists to be shown/distributed who could not attract sufficient business to offset the costs of providing services. Since virtually no videomakers were able to attract sufficient business to recover costs, the subsidy was essential to having much of an audience at all. By supporting these operations, public funders were able to bring video to diverse audiences and, ultimately, to further the dialogue between artist and audience necessary for the medium's continued evolution.

The case of subsidized equipment access has more direct aesthetic implications. In that case, public funds underwrote the extremely expensive operations of equipment purchase, administration and maintenance, thus enabling "equipment pools" to rent or loan equipment at very low cost. The effect of this funding strategy was to provide over the years many thousands of small subsidies in the form of free or low-cost equipment access. Moreover, individuals did not have to pass through the rigorous reviews required in formal grant situations so that beginning and experienced videomakers were given access to the apparatus of subsidy with a minimum of fuss and waiting. In most cases, access organizations concurrently conducted publicly subsidized educational programs to introduce newcomers to, the art form.

In theoretical terms, the costs of supporting administrative overhead were justified by a greater equality of access across barriers of age, gender, race, geography, class and by the diversity of formal approaches that might be fostered through such open access.

Realistically, the open access model is inherently limited to low tech tools. Because of the need to distribute limited funds broadly, the largest grants for such purposes were/are in the neighborhood of \$55,000, an amount insufficient to purchase and maintain any but the most basic equipment. Thus, equipment throughout most of the seventies was confined mainly to black and white reel-to-reel portapaks, reel-to-reel manual editing systems, relatively inexpensive microphones and simple lighting. Post-production was primitive and all editing systems were cuts-only. Color, unless synthesized, was virtually unknown. Color cameras were then so costly relative to the resources of the system that at one point NYSCA directly purchased one decidedly non-broadcast quality color camera for statewide circulation.

However, in compensation for the limited sophistication of the tools was the extremely low cost of access. In 1978 the Media Equipment Resource Center (MERC), a program of Young Filmmakers/Video, Arts, New York City's equipment pool, provided portable equipment and video rough editing gratis; its multi-camera studio was \$10 per hour; its "Video Fine Edit" cost \$4 per hour. Electronic Arts Intermix was even less expensive. Its-relatively sophisticated editing room cost \$25 per day although a project review was required. Under such circumstances, equipment costs were a small barrier to video producers comfortable with low-end technology. (Legge 1978: 11)

Another important by-product of both direct and indirect public subsidy was the immediate legitimization conferred on unconventional practices of the medium. Significantly, the demise of the term "underground film" and its subsequent replacement by "independent film" coincides with the first public funding of the medium, the

implication being that certain film practices were no longer unrecognized and unsanctioned activities. But what sets video apart from film is that it was never an "underground" activity; because of the coincidence of technology and funding, at no point in its history was video practiced without the possibility of institutional recognition and the accompanying reward systems. Despite the implications of such terms as "Radical Software" and the somewhat disingenuous "Guerrilla Television," public funding in the form of institutional and fellowship support undercut the possibility of marginality in those individuals and groups who chose to participate in the system. Independent video may be marginal in relation to commercial television and the mainstream art world, but for most artists it is neither possible nor desirable to be marginal in relation to a system set up to foster their work. In a relatively indulgent funding system an artist's self-marginality (as expressed in a refusal to "play the game" by applying for grants and gigs) is more irrelevance than independence, and no one wishes to be irrelevant. The practical effect of these sanctions was powerfully centralizing in that virtually all independent production operated or aspired to operate within the subsidized infrastructure of production grants, exhibition opportunities, distribution, etc. (It is, of course, thoroughly impossible for an organization accepting public funds to remain marginal. Reporting obligations and objective performance requirements force organizations, if they are to receive their second grant, to shape up into some semblance of sound management.)"

What is the interplay between funding and production, between funding and aesthetics? Can it be shown that significant works would not have been made, or would have been made differently, if the infrastructure itself was different?

Simply by looking at gross figures, a relationship between funding and work produced can be seen. In a comparison of institutional funding in New York State and the nation, a 1978 survey of video access organizations listed thirty-nine open and limited-access media organizations nationwide. Nearly 50% were located in New York State. Furthermore, a brief perusal of the survey indicates that the largest and most varied media equipment equipment were then at such New York State institutions as MERC (NYC), Media Study/Baffalo, Electronic Arts Intermix (NYC) and Intermedia Arts Center (Long Island). (Legge: 49)

New York State is also the clear leader in number of prominent practitioners. An unscientific survey of the eighty titles reviewed in Deirdre Boyle's *Video Classics* shows that more than half received NYSCA support (direct or indirect), or were made by individuals who had previously received NYSCA support or had been resident of New York State for a significant portion of their professional careers. The proportion would be considerably greater if one were to include those works made outside New York without NYSCA support, but distributed by NYSCA-supported agencies.

NEA production awards to New York State residents confirm this ratio: 62% of the 1984 awards (this figure includes both film and video) went to New York State residents (*Afterimage*, 1984).

Is it possible to develop a more refined and specific assessment of the aesthetic impact of public support of video? The most reliable assessments can be made by examining two approaches to the medium: documentary and image-processing. Documentary, particularly those works that focus on social problems and the need for

change have an almost inherent ambition for large audiences. The possibility of broadcast vastly redirected this ambition (which I will discuss later in this essay). Oddly enough, image-processing, usually a rather rarefied endeavor directed to a fine arts audience and blessed with relatively modest production costs, was also greatly influenced by public subsidy.

The core aspiration of image-processing is the artists' desire to work in non-mimetic modes—modes which have not, until recently, been supported by commercially available hardware. As a result, specialized equipment was invented through collaborations between electronic designers/computer programmers and artists (or by artists who were themselves electronic designers). Such devices included video synthesizers, image processors, multi-level keyers, automated switchers, frame buffers, colorizers and other equipment capable of creating and manipulating images in ways otherwise inaccessible. The development of many of these devices was subsidized directly and indirectly by public funds. Directly, by grants for research and development (or purchase of a prototype) and indirectly by substantial purchases by subsidized institutions and by artists who had received fellowships. Because the visual texture and/or dynamic of image-processed tapes is strongly dependent upon the tools employed (an informed viewer can frequently discern the hardware), in a very real sense the designers—and by extension the funders—are collaborators in the evolution of the aesthetic.

Because these specialized devices exist only in unique versions or limited production runs, the practice of image-processed video—except in those few cases where the artists themselves own sufficient equipment—is generally confined to a few publicly

supported studios. Thus, unlike videomakers who utilize conventional tools, those working in image-processed modes are especially dependent upon subsidy because appropriate facilities are available primarily within the subsidized infrastructure.\* And organizations that operate the facilities are themselves unusually dependent upon public subsidy because the possibilities for earned income (i.e. fees paid by users) are extremely limited. Work in image-processed video is unusually time-intensive: the specialized tools are so complex in their design and interaction with one another that pre-visualization of all but the simplest processes is essentially impossible. Thus video artists, who generally don't have much money, require long stays at very low cost to do effective work.

In the 1970s, image-processing facilities were supported at Media Study/Buffalo, the Experimental Television Center (Binghamton, now in Owego) and the TV Lab at WNET. Outside New York, notable facilities included the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, whose Image Processor was designed with public funds by Dan Sandin, and the National Center for Experiments in Television, affiliated with the San Francisco public TV station KQED.

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\* Nonetheless, the role of universities and art schools in the support of image-processing should not be minimized. Many educational institutions maintain **image-processing** facilities which are used not only by students, but also by instructors in the creation of their own work.

## High-Tech Equipment and Broadcast Television

Although low-cost low-tech equipment was the technological and ideological foundation of independent video, videomakers were clamoring for high-tech tools from the medium's earliest days. In part, this came from frustration over the limited flexibility and poor signal quality of most low-cost equipment. But it also came from the related matter of television, and the promise of very large audiences.

Inevitably, public funding requires visibility, and for video visibility means broadcast. The infrastructural strategy of fostering production, distribution, exhibition, education, preservation and criticism attempts, implicitly, the creation of a mature art form in the shortest possible time. This ambitious goal is faced with a dilemma due to the different time scales of cultural and political development: cultural developments, at best, require decades; political developments are assessed with each fiscal year.

While video was able to develop unhindered by the constraints of legislative oversight during the Rockefeller years, his elevation to the Vice-Presidency in 1974 put an end to all that. Rodger Larson:

NYSCA was Rockefeller's pet thing, and it was impervious to political influence. The legislature didn't even know about it, and what they knew about it, they didn't do anything about because he was so powerful.

After he left, the Council increasingly came under the scrutiny of the state legislature, and they were looking it over head to toe.... And Peter [Bradley] said to me, "Rodger, this is the beginning of the politicization of the Council. The good old days are over and it's going to get increasingly worse." (Larson)

When after only four or five years NYSCA had to justify its funding policies, one important way to do so was to smooth the way for the creation of broadcastable works. It was probably not a complete coincidence that the TV Lab was formally constituted in 1974—the year Rockefeller left the governorship—and the Synapse affiliation with the superb broadcast facilities of Syracuse University began the year after. (A similar but more limited artist-in-residence program was established at Rochester public TV station WXXI at around that time.) Also, during those years NYSCA had funded the purchase of time base correctors for several public television stations to facilitate the broadcasting of 1/2" reel-to-reel material. (Time base correctors, which were then quite expensive, enable small format tapes to meet **broadcast** technical standards.) It should be stated that other philanthropic agencies, including the NEA, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Rockefeller Foundation, also made important grants to broadcast artist-in-residence programs.

These AIR programs, intended to be the delivery system for high-tech, functioned as limited access facilities. High technology imparts advantages in signal quality and **certain technical operations, such as** the mixing of several source tapes; intricate, rapid, precise editing; digital effects; multi-generation effects and other post-production options.

High technology is inherently expensive technology and therefore exclusive. The equipment is expensive to purchase, expensive to maintain and expensive to operate. Accordingly, working time is limited, necessitating greater pre-visualization and discipline on the part of the artist and concomitantly diminishing the possibilities for discovery and improvisation. High technology generally requires large grants, with the effect that the work must justify itself on grounds other than its mere excellence, particularly when that excellence, while recognized by cognoscenti, may elude others less familiar with video's expressive modalities. While acceptance as an artist-in-residence did not carry broadcast obligations, it was implicit in the enterprise that the TV Lab was engaged in aiding works both technically and aesthetically suitable for broadcast in their appropriate contexts. Many prominent works were created or post-produced through these programs. It is fair to say that the great majority of these works would not have been created in their final form if such subsidized facilities were not available.

The role of broadcast television in the formation of the aesthetics of independent video is enormous. Television, in diverse ways, is almost always the referent there is work which unabashedly aspires to television, work which wishes to make use of the tools available to television stations, work which in a post-modem vein appropriates or is about television, and work which seeks specifically not to be television. The sheer size of the audience and the prestige of the institution serve to make television broadcast one of the two most important validators of independent video (the other being a major museum show). The political importance of broadcast lies in the funders' ability to rationalize grant activity by pointing to 1) the prestige of broadcast and 2) its ability to deliver large

audiences at comparatively low cost per head. While funding initiatives also aided exhibition opportunities in gallery and media center settings, the audiences were generally small and composed substantially of initiates: Institutions received substantial subsidies for weekly screenings with ten to thirty persons in attendance. (I remember a few occasions where it was only me, the host and the tape.) With audiences so small, a hard-nosed analysis shows a high cost per person served with attendant difficulties in program justification. But broadcast, with its ability to reach tens of thousands, even on Sunday night, gives the appearance of an efficient use of funds. Thus, for the Media Program officers, the broadcast of subsidized tapes serves to aid in justifying the entire enterprise to those outside the immediate field, such as senior administrators, Council members and legislators. It should be noted that while the system itself has a built-in bias toward broadcast, many videomakers were themselves clamoring for broadcast opportunities.

The effects of broadcast present a paradox: while television has had great force in channeling aesthetics, the efforts of independents to break into the broadcast system have not been broadly successful. In essence, broadcast's power is so great that its slender possibility is sufficient to skew the development of the medium. Ralph Hocking, the founder and Director of the Experimental Television Center/Owego, a major center for image-processed video, acknowledged the powerful allure of broadcast to the field at large:

We started this thing to provide alternatives to commercial television. Gradually we're being absorbed into a structure of high technology and delivery systems—broadcast. We're being

told that the only way to exist is to become part of this. If we can no longer do what we set out to do we may as well quit. (as quoted by Trend 1981:4)

Video *art*, referring in this context to non-documentary tapes which make use of video as an art form in itself, has been broadcast only in special series conducted sporadically at unlikely and inconspicuous time slots without much in the way of promotion. Particularly for documentaries, the validation of television has an enormous impact on fund raising from public and private sources, and thus on program structure and content. Debra Zimmerman, Director of Women Make Movies, a non-profit organization devoted to distribution of tapes by and about women, observes,

The documentary has been totally perverted by television: Because of the structures of PBS: programs of 58 minutes, accessibility and a narrator that takes you through the stages: First I'm going to tell you what you're going to see, then I'm going to show you what you see, then I'm going to tell you how you just saw what you saw.' This is the modus operandi of television documentary. In order for PBS to compete in its own fashion, they have to put this kind of stuff on.

Whether the program will get on TV is hanging over the head of anyone who produces media. It is the single largest audience that anyone can find and a major legitimization. And right now I think that's a terrible problem because everyone who comes to me with a proposal going to a funder all put down "my work will be shown on PBS." Ha! I've gotten more calls than I can count from funders following up on artists' proposals asking "Will this work get on PBS?" This is very disturbing. Even though they [PBS and CPB] give very little money they still have substantial impact on what gets made. Rationally, because they fund so few projects and give so little money they should have very little impact. If you have any intention of getting the program on PBS, which is an important part of your funding proposal, it has to be designed in a certain acceptable fashion. (Zimmerman 1988)

The efforts of independents to gain access to CPB program funds through open solicitation have generally met with disappointing results. In one striking episode, the staff or the CPB-funded series *Crisis-to-Crisis* had approved for funding none of the 305 submissions it received from independents. Although outside readers for the series recommended 42 proposals, one CPB staff member remarked, "People didn't understand what we were looking for, so we decided that rather than dilute the concept we'd withhold any funding." Jennifer Lawson, the CPB Program Coordinator stated,

Part of the problem is that the concerns of independent producers are out of sync with the intentions of *Crisis-to-Crisis* ... We get a lot of proposals to do cultural documentaries on things like the decline of the family farm, and while they might make interesting films, they're not the kind of things our audience is interested in. Our responsibility is two sided, both to independent producers and to our audience... Public television does not exist in a vacuum. (as quoted by Trend 1981:3)

The dilemma is that television, even when specifically subsidized for independent work, is a top-down exercise in program control, likely to be out of touch with the independent producers. As one public television executive explained,

Our biggest problem is that there is no room to fail... You don't have room to experiment... Unfortunately, being sophisticated in this system means knowing what can be funded, and that means you don't even bother to put forward things on the cutting edge, that might even be a little controversial. (Gever 1988: 18)

In essence, public television is too expensive to take risks, because risks entail the possibility of alienating underwriters and the upper middle-class, middle-age viewers who are the mainstay of fund drives and ratings. Public broadcasting's own marketplace has a strongly normative aesthetic role.

In the earliest days of video, there was virtually no opportunity to get on television, and certain technical issues conspired to keep independents off the airwaves. But since the late 1970s improvements in equipment have made "broadcast quality" an easily achievable goal. And while the number remains small, there are now more opportunities for broadcast than ever before and it is apparent that these opportunities are creating a centripetal force acting on the development of the documentary form. Almost without exception, the public broadcast of independent works is supported with public funds.

The aesthetic impact of working consciously for broadcast is well illustrated in two tapes by John Reilly. *The Irish Tapes*, made with Stefan Moore in 1972 is a documentary survey of conflict in Northern Ireland. It stands in sharp stylistic and ideological contrast to *Giving Birth: Four Portraits*, made with Julie Gustafson, and released in 1976.

Technically, *The Irish Tapes* exists at the ground zero of video. It was made with a black and white reel-to-reel portapak (although not a particularly reliable example of its breed, to judge from all the glitches, tracking errors, drop-outs and other obvious technical imperfections) without clear hope or expectation of broadcast. Due to equipment limitations all transitions are cuts only and all edits are audio and video together (i.e. there are no edited cut-aways or drop-ins). On the one hand this absence of expectation for mainstream distribution grants the videomakers some degree of expressive freedom while on the other they are severely constrained by technical limitations. It is a tribute to Reilly and Moore that they were able to overcome these technical limitations to produce a remarkable and evocative work.

In sharp contrast to conventional documentary, the hand held camera in *The Irish Tapes* is never for a moment static and constantly roves over details and telling images. This approach to camera work—in which editorial judgments are performed live—is the most striking stylistic aspect of the tape. Another hallmark is the "real-time cut-away," in which the camera wanders from the interview subject to reveal other aspects of the scene. One assumes that this maneuver developed out of the impossibility of performing cutaways in post-production. Sometimes the camera hits something interesting, sometimes it doesn't, sometimes it must refocus, reframe or rezoom several times before it lands on something significant. But it doesn't much matter because we are observing aspects of the documentary process which are, in more conventional products, concealed- in The editing. Moreover, the content of the tape is so charged, the scenes so fascinating, and the information so dense, that the tape is riveting.

These stylistic devices operate in support of an ideological stance in which the medium—in sharp distinction to the practices of broadcast television—eschews a special and privileged authority. The impromptu and wandering camera negates the authority typically accorded a deliberate and steady gaze: a camera that "knows what it sees and knows where it's going." In the interviews themselves—all person-on-the-street—the makers display no pretension to knowing more than the participants or audience. Instead, they are explorers and witnesses, presenting as evidence for their own and our understanding the images, words and sounds of a society blown apart. Moreover, the complete absence of other devices of authority, such as voice-overs and expert interviews, reinforces the immediacy and actuality of the reportage. While no ideological position is

directly stated, the inference of strong Catholic sympathy is unmistakable.

Reilly had little expectation of broadcast when he made *The Irish Tapes* in 1972. The work was edited for display in two formats: a multi-channel installation format on six to twelve monitors and a single-image version for straight playback. The tape's technical quality was so poor that when it was finally broadcast by WNET in 1975 they were unable to air the tape directly and had to resort to rescanning (shooting tape playback off a monitor) to meet government technical regulations.

Judging from appearances, *Giving Birth: Four Portraits* was planned for broadcast from the beginning. The stylistic and methodological shifts are striking in comparison with *The Irish Tapes*. Nearly all the defining characteristics of the earlier work are here substantially conventionalized.

This work examines the process of giving birth as experienced by four couples with different approaches to delivery: a standard hospital delivery with local anesthesia, a home birth on Leboyerist principles, an attempt at natural childbirth which results in a caesarean, and a nurse/mid-wife delivery according to natural practices. Each couple occupies its own self-contained section and there are no references across sections. The impressionistic and personalized documentary technique of *The Irish Tapes*, in which the editing is based more on kinetic momentum than thematic continuity, is here supplanted by "slices of life" enclosed with a traditional descriptive stance presented by an objective observer. This attempt at objectification is further enhanced by the statements of experts—interviews from which the questions were excised—which are intercut with documentary footage and parental interviews. Thus, each of the four approaches to

birthing is contextualized by an authoritative statement. In each section, it appears that the expert is unknown to the family and is not directly involved in the delivery, thus enhancing the implication of objectified authority.

Stylistically, the tape is in sharp contrast to previous work. The "eternal present" of *The Irish Tapes* has been abandoned, supplanted by strong narrative control established by skillful use of establishing sequences, flashbacks and flashforwards, repetition of shots in flashback, and staged reaction shots within interviews. Considerably greater attention is paid to production values in the later work. Shot in color (except a section where a low-light black and white camera was employed), artificial lighting is used for many locations and all interviews. In sharp contrast to *The Irish Tapes*, the interviews are shot in close-up or medium close-up without background or ambiance; the camera neither reframes nor leaves its subject; all shots except those of the actual births are deliberate, clearly focused, steady and frontal, with none of the energetic roving of the earlier tape. More advanced post-production equipment permitted Reilly and Gustafson to bypass the "dynamic cutaways" used so effectively in the earlier work. In contrast to the rather frenetic pace of *The Irish Tapes*, the editorial tempo of *Giving Birth* is, overall, rather measured and deliberate.

Nonetheless, *Giving Birth* is unmistakably the work of independents, not only in the circumstances of its creation and funding but also for its content. Even slipped in at 11 pm on Sunday night, the tape presents subject matter inconceivable on commercial television, and deals with its sensitive subject with candor and maturity. It is a fine and touching work.

For all this, however, *Giving Birth* is basically a detached, balanced, well-considered survey of contemporary social phenomena. The radical and personal expression of independent documentary as manifested in *The Irish Tapes* has here been tamed. The striking divergence between these two tapes underscores the irony of broadcast: access to better equipment, more generous budgets and larger audiences carries with it also the intense pressure to conventionalize modes of expression. That only three years separates the making of these two very different works serves to confirm the powerful accelerative forces operating on the development of video.

### **The Future of the Infrastructure**

In recent years new emphasis at NYSCA has been placed on the support of projects of individual artists, chiefly through the Individual Artists Program, begun in 1984. Although applications are submitted through non-profit organizations—a process called sponsorship—applications are judged primarily on grounds of artistic merit and awards are made without institutional review. .

Project funding tends to foster more ambitious and expensive productions than are fostered by fellowship and institutional support. In 1986-7, thirty project grants totaling \$400,000 were awarded in amounts ranging from \$6,300 to \$25,000 (*Afterimage* 1988), which represent only partial project support, the full project budgets are usually much

higher. Fellowship awards to individual artists in the CAPS and NYFA programs, by comparison, have never risen above \$6,000. The 'need for carefully considered descriptions, detailed budgets, and a willing institutional sponsor combined with the fact that for the lucky ones, the delay between the application and the check is most of a year, foster a more deliberate and pre-planned approach to production. -Also influential is the size of the grants: the availability of such amounts tends to define the size of productions, at least at the lower end. It is reasonable to suppose that when grants of \$15,000 are available from a primary source, video projects costing \$20,000 - \$40,000 will often be proposed. Similarly, grants of \$7000 are likely to engender proposals of \$10,000 - \$25,000.

Technological developments have tended to reduce—but by no means to eliminate—the dependence of videomakers on the infrastructure. Adjusted for inflation, the cost of equipment has fallen dramatically while signal quality has substantially improved. Moreover, several routes to relatively affordable high quality production have opened, most notably the On-Line and Standby programs, in which otherwise unbooked time at high-end commercial post-production facilities is made available to independents at substantially reduced rates. For instance, editing rooms which normally rent for \$800 per hour are thus made available to independents for \$125 per hour. While both On-Line and Standby receive subsidies for program coordination from NYSCA and the NEA, the post-production services themselves are not subsidized.

While public funders have maintained their basic commitment to the infrastructure they helped establish, subsidies have not substantially risen and when adjusted for

inflation, have actually declined. At the same time, operating budgets of constituent organizations have risen dramatically. The resulting gap has forced organizations to restructure themselves economically—and therefore programatically just to maintain existing services. Such restructurings often pose difficult challenges to organizations wishing to maintain their original mission.

These two developments—declining subsidies and increased emphasis on funding the projects of individuals—have changed the expressed purpose of public funding of video in recent years. What was originally proffered as continuing support of video's infrastructure has now come to be considered "seed money" to be used for partial support of programs which will generate substantial other sources of income, earned or from private contributions, private foundations and corporate donations. John Giancola, then Media Director of NYSCA, observed in 1980 that it "was generally perceived within NYSCA, principally by the fiscal people, that the TV/Media program had to be brought into line with the funding policies for other disciplines." This meant that NYSCA was attempting to lower its contribution to the operating budget of media centers, which had ranged from 20% to 80% to no more than 25% with a maximum of \$50,000. Specifically exempted from this requirement were the Experimental TV Center/Owego, Film/Video Arts and Synapse (which folded in 1982) because the nature of the "core services"(equipment access) they provide "makes it more difficult to raise funds." If their funding were cut back to the 25% level, it was unlikely they would survive. (Sturken 1980:2)

For the most part, attempts to obtain funds from private foundations and corporate sources have not been very successful although some private foundations have responded. Commonly, institutions are depending upon greater "earned income" to fill the gap. Earned income generally refers to fees paid by users for services: for access organizations, equipment rental fees; for exhibitors, ticket sales; for distributors, tape rental fees, etc. Thus, with an ever-diminishing subsidy, organizations are asking the users to carry a greater portion of the burden. This marketplace solution forces the organizations to focus on activities which have the greatest likelihood of earned income; further discouraging enterprises out of the mainstream.

While Media Director of NYSCA, John Giancola delivered this analysis to a conference of media arts centers in 1983:

1. Government Funding: In terms of government funding of the media arts movement, a distinct period is ending and another is beginning. The period ending may be distinguished in two major ways: 1) there was a lot of money loose in the economy; and 2) there was a floating up of grassroots intellectuality, creativity and ideas, however radical or discontinuous those ideas were to and with the prevalent culture. In the small, innovative and emerging field such as media arts, the funder and the applicant often found themselves in a kind of partnership. By nature, the

field was chaotic, but that never seemed to bother its major supporters; in fact, the chaos was seen as a kind of health. It was on some level an adventure—an adventurous partnership. Ever critical of each other, funder and applicant were, nevertheless, in a cultural symbiosis.

In the next period, they will be, by necessity, in an economic symbiosis. Government funders will demand more by way of formal accountability (natural in a tight money situation). The darling infant media arts of the late sixties, already perceived as a somewhat unruly teen-ager by the late seventies, is now clearly over twenty-one and on its own.

Is the media arts ready to be on its own? I daresay not. And of course it isn't—not yet anyway. Two hard facts must still be reckoned with: (A) Government funders -have less money to give (less money by far when inflation is factored); and (B) over time, the government arts agencies will act less :like cultural supporters and more like economic supporters of culture. Why? Because the funding agencies (government and non-government alike) must themselves respond to societal trends in order to survive.

Tight money means "Back to basics!" Back to basics means "How does your media center manage? Well, or poorly?" More than ever, that will count. The adventurous partnership is over. The "new" adventure is that the practical partnership has begun. (Giancola 1983)

At the same conference, Brian O'Dougherty of the NEA was more direct: "You can't move on without courting wealth, power and connections." (as quoted by *Afterimage* 1983). The field reacted indignantly to this sentiment. In his response, Lawrence Sapadin, Executive Director of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, advocated an increased public role as a necessary guarantor of diversity:

The challenge is not to fool bankers into thinking we are profitable or good for their image, but to fight to expand the public sector to guarantee a thriving, independent media that speaks for diverse interests and unrepresented communities. To seek support among bankers and real estate brokers is to ally with those who will tolerate you as long as you are polite. To seek support among those for whom you provide a voice is to ally yourself with people who are passionately committed to your survival (*Afterimage* 1983).

Nonetheless, the public funders now provide a smaller proportion of operating budgets than at any time in the past. These funding changes force a degree of institutional caution and make difficult the establishment of new institutions.

Funding budgets have remained more or less constant, and the maintenance of the infrastructure leaves little left over for new initiatives. As one funding officer observed,

Anyone who has had to manage a department's budget at the Council realizes how little flexibility there really is to make changes from year to year. There's very little room to budge. There's not a lot left over after you've made the basic awards... There are always things you can juggle...but unless people are willing to make radical changes, it's extremely difficult to move things. You'd have to decide certain kinds of activities were simply not going to be supported any more. You could be like the Rockefeller Foundation, "We'll only fund inter-cultural, cross-cultural and related projects." It's more difficult for a public agency and it's even more difficult for a program that bears the broad supportive role for its field. It becomes a moral issue, and that's the way it's felt... Two million dollars is enough to make a difference, but because so much is spoken for, it's difficult to make a change. (Anonymous 1989)

New York State's media infrastructure has contracted during the Reagan years. Important organizations in all regions have ceased operation, although the effect is felt most acutely in upstate areas. Media Study/Buffalo, Ithaca Video Projects, Synapse, Portable Channel (Rochester), Woodstock Community Video, the access program of ZBS Media, the video program at the Everson Museum (Syracuse) and Qthers have shut down. Although they closed for diverse reasons, the troubling reality is that, except in the case of Squeaky Wheel in Buffalo, no new groups have risen to take their place. The great majority of organizations currently delivering subsidized services were founded in the 1970s and few new institutions have been created. Outside New York City, the infrastructure has always been just one layer thick, so when the top layer fails, there's nothing below to take its place. The effect of this infrastructural failure is to lessen the opportunity to make and view video in large areas of the State..

It may eventually be seen that the ambitious state enterprise of attempting to broadly distribute opportunities to make and view video was an 'act of cultural and political hubris predestined to a brief life span: a transitional phenomenon with a significant legacy. The failure of new organizations to take up the slack left by those which have failed may indicate that there is no real slack to take up. It may be that the activism of public funders simply gave the appearance of decentralization by supporting organizations which, being peripheral to their communities, fulfilled no essential needs.

However, institutions can play a central role in their communities, and government support can be of critical importance of those institutions. In one striking incident, when Media Study/Buffalo ceased delivering access and exhibition services, a grass-roots effort

of local video and film makers organized Squeaky Wheel, which successfully and immediately secured NYSCA funding for a wide variety of programs. Even the organization's name (it's the squeaky wheel which gets the oil) is evidence of the pervasive influence and *a priori* expectation of public funding. Similarly, when the NEA unexpectedly cut the Experimental Television Center's grant from \$9,000 in 1986-7 to nothing in 1987-1988, an outpouring of support and donations from its users—and a one-time special grant from NYSCA—enabled it to keep its doors open. From these two cases, it is indisputable that the infrastructure can be of critical importance to videomakers.

Overall, the enterprise which is independent video must be judged a success. Video is regularly exhibited in museums, collected in libraries, taught at universities and art schools nationwide and, most important; practiced by more artists than at any time in its history. To balance this, independent video does not reach a wide audience, nor has it spawned vital critical dialogues, nor .has it achieved the cultural legitimacy attractive to corporate and private underwriters. And of course, video has not developed—and has no apparent prospect of developing—an independent marketplace analogous to those which exist for the other visual arts. For lack of an alternative, today, as in the past, the medium remains substantially dependent upon public subsidy.

Perhaps, in the coming era of government austerity, the medium's inherent paradox will become apparent: that independent video is independent only as long as it is supported by government funds. Video was engendered by a singular and unnatural act, the underwriting of radical aspirations with public money, and was shaped by that support and came to depend on it. And while those active in the field accept this benevolent

patronage as part of the natural order—as indeed it should be—the conflation of cultural/political radicalism with public philanthropy is patently an unstable mixture. This instability combined with altered economic and social conditions make it unlikely that the practice of the medium can long remain so thoroughly encapsulated by public funding. In the future, video will either break out of its declining public subsidy or be condemned to live within it.

It may be that we have already left the first historical period of video. This developmental stage was marked by various forms of experimentation: formal, technological and contextual. Partially because of the infrastructural subsidy, the aesthetics of the medium were relatively unconstrained by the necessity of attracting large audiences. While many videomakers may have wanted to reach a large public, general audiences were not absolutely necessary to the practice of the art and a great diversity of work was produced and exhibited. Insofar as agencies took on a large share of the economic burden, the most important audience was composed of initiates: the artists, administrators and critics who mold opinion in the video world and, as it happens, were likely to serve on funding review panels. It is hard to see how an art medium receiving government support in its early stages could have functioned otherwise.

But if we are now in video's second phase, it is impossible to get a firm handle on all the factors which will contribute to the evolution of the medium. One thing is certain, the philanthropic "market forces" which assisted the medium in its first stage will be vastly attenuated in importance relative to the medium's needs. In part, this will be caused by a relative "drying up" of public grants. In addition, needs themselves may change as a

result of the likely expansion of video brought on by the wide availability of camcorders and home VCRs. While the aesthetic impact of these two factors is impossible to project, the medium will certainly "open up" in the same way that many "serious photographers" received their first exposure (no pun) to photography by taking snapshots with Instamatic cameras. It may be that the medium is about to make the transition from a small, relatively elite enterprise to an omnipresent and fully assimilated component of the information landscape. Therefore, some of the populist aspiration of "Guerrilla Television" may yet be realized, although we should recognize the pungent irony that the forces underlying this media dispersion will have little to do with the practices and ideology of independent video. They will instead derive from the manufacturing and marketing abilities of large Japanese companies.

While its future forms are unpredictable, video as art, as documentary, and as a tool for activism will undoubtedly continue. In the past twenty years videomakers have created a body of work so impressive and varied that the aesthetic foundations for the future development of the medium are in place. Insofar as the NEA and NYSCA were strongly influential in the creation of this body of work, the aesthetic influence of these two agencies will be felt for a long time to come.

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